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Bulgarian Held In '81 Attempt To Kill the Pope

By HENRY KAMM

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ROME, Nov. 25 — An employee of the Bulgarian national airline and tourist office was arrested here today and charged with complicity in the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II last year.

An official police spokesman told Ansa, the national news agency, that the suspect was believed to have more than just a remote connection with the case and was accused of being a very active accomplice of Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk who shot the Pope on May 13, 1981. Attempts to get further detail from official sources were unsuccessful.

The arrest was made at the office of the Balkan Airlines and Tourist Organization by the special antiterrorist branch of the police. The suspect was identified as Serge Ivanov Antonov, 35 years old, who has lived here for four years.

Mr. Agca, the Pope's assailant, is serving a life sentence. He has repeatedly asserted that he acted alone. However, two other Turks have been arrested on suspicion of complicity.

Balkan Airlines, for which Mr. Antonov worked, is an agency of the Bulgarian Government, and in many countries employees of Soviet-bloc airlines have been arrested or expelled as secret police agents. Mr. Antonov, as an employee of the airline, had access to parked airplanes at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport without having to go through passport controls.

An unconfirmed report circulating

here suggested that Mr. Antonov is suspected of having provided a hideout for the assailant during his stay in Rome. There was another report, citing unidentified police sources, that Mr. Antonov may have driven Mr. Agca to St. Peter's Square on the day of the attack.

One of the Turks under arrest, Omar Bagci, is suspected of having provided Mr. Agca with the gun used in the assassination attempt. Italian police, however, have not been able to determine how Mr. Agca brought the gun into Italy. Arrested in Switzerland, he was extradited to Italy last month. The investigating magistrate, Ilario Martella, has also moved for the extradition of Musa Cedar Celibi, who is being held in West Germany.

Mr. Martella is taking published American reports on a Soviet link seriously enough to have visited the United States to question people connected to the reports. The Soviet Union has rejected the allegations.

Journalistic investigations have led both NBC News and Claire Sterling, a writer who specializes in terrorism, to contend that the attempt against the Pope was organized by the Soviet secret police operating through its Bulgarian counterpart.

The Bulgarian Embassy tonight issued an indignant condemnation of Mr. Antonov's arrest. The statement distributed to news organizations declared that Mr. Antonov was an official of Bulgarian civil aviation, "honest, conscientious" and innocent of any violation of Italian law or international norms of conduct.

The embassy criticized Italy for not informing it of the ground for the official's arrest and denounced reports linking him to the attempt on the Pope's life as "ill-intentioned inventions." It declared that Bulgaria maintained good relations with Italy and the Vatican and opposed terrorism.



United Press International

Serge Ivanov Antonov after he was arrested yesterday in Rome.